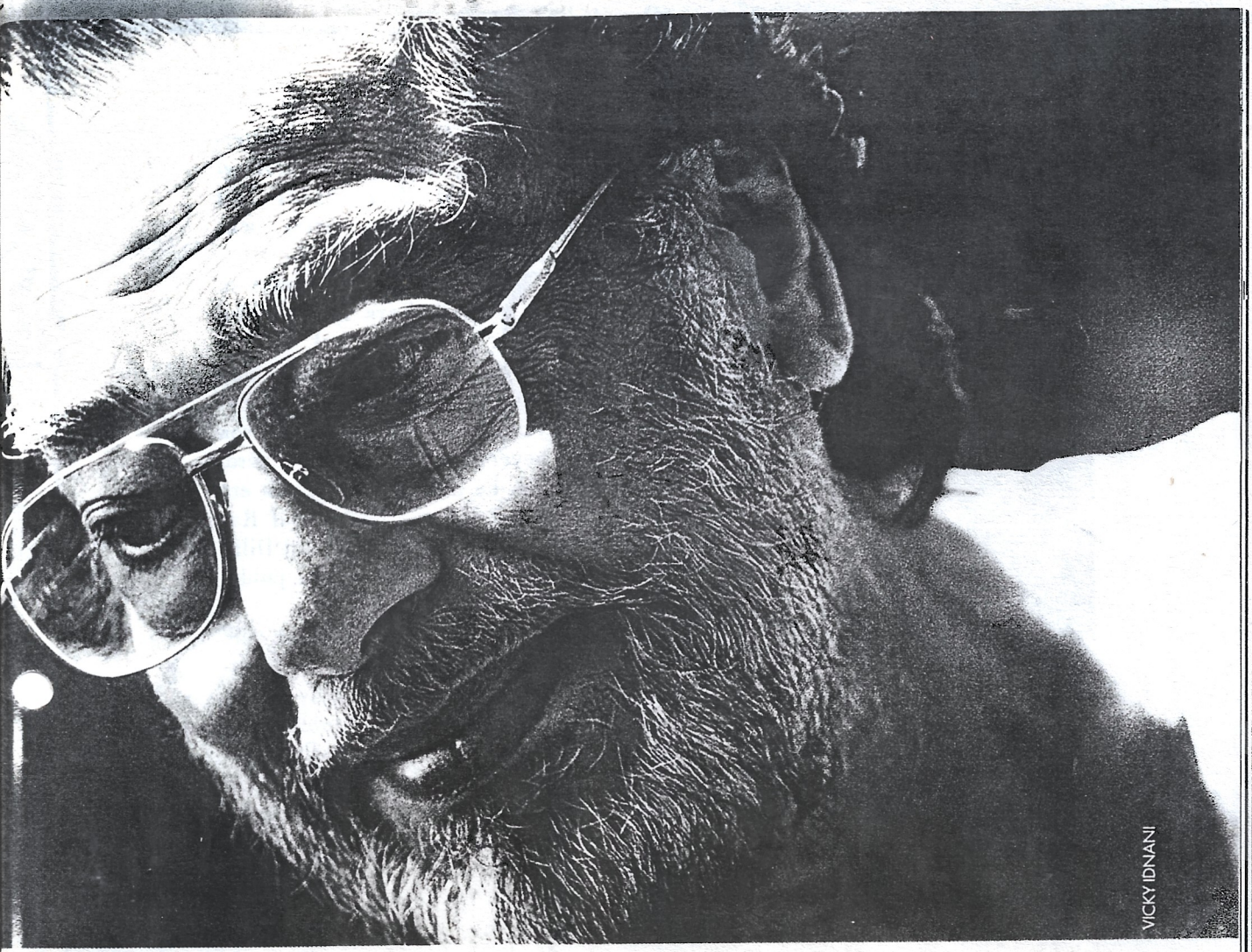


VICKY IDNANI

Prince of Tides

PRADEEP KUMAR, INDIAN CINEMA'S PEHLA MUGHAL, PASSED AWAY ON OCTOBER 28 AT THE AGE OF 76. EXTRACTS FROM ONE OF HIS LAST INTERVIEWS

FILMS WERE POISON FOR MY FAMILY. AT THE RISK OF BEING DISOWNED BY MY FATHER, I TOOK THE PLUNGE

There was a news item tucked away in the back pages of the papers way back when I was a kid. Curiously enough, it has stayed like a pressed flower with me.

The news concerned the trend of film-makers to zoom off to Europe for location shoots, a trend which was initiated as soon as colour came in a big and splashy way to our movies in the '60s.

A reporter had asked one of the matinee idols of the time to comment and he had said, "First, let us use our own locations before blowing up valuable foreign exchange to shoot at the Eiffel Tower or the Leaning Tower of Pisa. We have our own Taj Mahal which is as, if not more, beautiful than any monument in the world."

The valid point had been made by the Shah Jehan of the widely-loved film *Taj Mahal*. The actor who was the hero of countless

historical pageants and latter-day love stories like *Aarti*, *Bhigi Raat* and *Meri Surat Teri Aankhen*. The actor was Pradeep Kumar.

Yesterday's generation remembers him as the *Pehla* Mughal. Today's movie lovers, however, may have to be reminded that 73-year-old Pradeep Kumar was never anointed the No.1 hero. Yet, he held his own in an era when the triumvirate of Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip Kumar reigned over the public imagination.

He sported that "*talwar* cut" moustache and seemed to represent the solid, sturdy values of the post-Independence Indian. Not conventionally handsome, he had a smooth style of his own, evident in his sharply-cut suits and the State Express cigarettes he smoked from a holder. He acted with every top heroine of his day, be it Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Nutan or Vyjayanthimala.

On tracing him to his Juhu flat, I discover that Pradeep Kumar is a former shadow of himself. Yes, he has become frail and weak. And at times, has to move in a wheelchair. Yet his lust for life remains undiminished. In retirement, imposed by the passage of time and circumstances, he leads a reclusive existence.

I CANNOT IMAGINE MYSELF GYRATING MY HIPS LIKE MOST OF OUR HEROES TODAY

Surprised that anyone should actually be interested in making him flashback to the glory days, he's a bit tight-lipped initially. But after a cup of tea, he opens up to tell me his story.

Pradeep Kumar was born into an orthodox Brahmin family in the Hoogly district of West Bengal. Narrates he, "Films were poison for my family which was highly literate and cultured. My father didn't approve of my decision to join films at all. He didn't see any future for me in the world of glamour. At the risk of being disowned by him, I took the plunge."

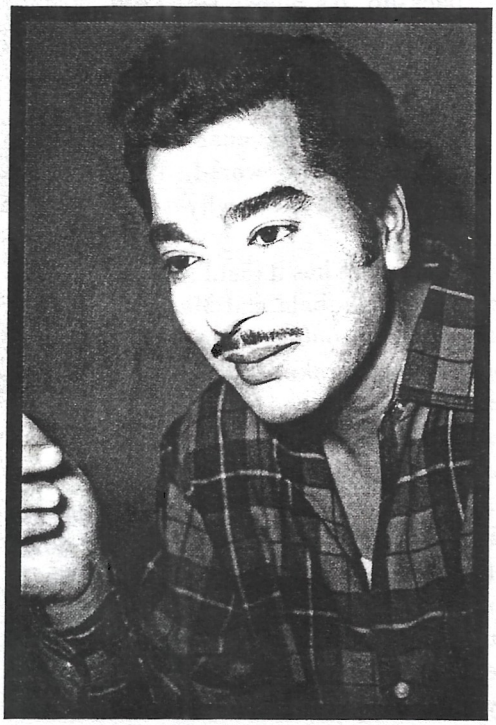
Circa 1944, he worked as a film technician and a theatre actor simultaneously. The legendary Debaki Bose spotted him on stage and cast him in *Alaknanda*. "But the film was bad news at the box office," Pradeep Kumar recalls mistily. "I was so upset that I went into a shell for nearly a year."

Debaki Bose, fortuitously, dragged the down-in-the-dumps

actor back into the studio. Followed *Bhooli Nai*. This film about the freedom struggle was released on August 15, 1947, at 1 p.m., just an hour after the Indian Independence. The response was tumultuous, instantly establishing the actor's credentials in Calcutta.

Next step: the Bombay films, obviously since they meant nation-wide exposure and recognition. "To make my dream come true, I started learning Hindi and Urdu, which were absolutely essential then. Not like today, when actors get away without knowing the *tehzeeb* of Urdu," he says, shaking his head with disbelief.

Bombay showbiz, he states without qualms, was more lucrative and promised a longer life-span for an actor than Bengali cinema. "My gamble paid off," he continues. "Sashadhar Mukherjee offered me *Anand Marg*, provided I signed an agreement to work exclusively for Filmistan for three years. I took the chance because the film was a bilingual—in Hindi and Tamil. I thought to myself... here's an opportunity to reach the southern part of my country. And mind you, again I took pains to learn Tamil. I took the business of acting seriously."



But it was with *Anarkali* (1953) and *Nagin* (1954) that the spotlight truly shone on Pradeep Kumar. As Prince Salim opposite Bina Rai's Anarkali and as a snake charmer opposite Vyjayanthimala, he became a saleable star pursued by producers of every stripe.

Anarkali was released much before *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) in which Dilip Kumar portrayed the lovelorn prince. "The personalities of Dilip, Dev and Raj were imposing," he admits, adding, "But I would say I had my unique style of acting which appealed to the moviegoers.

Dilip Kumar was the only all-rounder—he could handle comedy, tragedy, romance and action with equal ease. Dev and Raj had specific images though. Dev Anand had his irresistible mannerisms and a patented manner of dialogue delivery. Most often, Raj Kapoor was the lovable tramp... Producers had set roles for all of us, they knew in which part we would be accepted by the public."

NOWADAYS THE STORIES ARE THINNER THAN THE PAPER THEY'RE WRITTEN ON

While extolling the technical strides made by films today, Pradeep Kumar decries their story content. "Sorry to say, nowadays the stories and scripts are thinner than the paper they're written on," he regrets. "Even the music and lyrics are devoid of substance. I'm sure 25 years from now, even the top chartbusters will be forgotten. But take the songs from *Nagin*, *Anarkali* or *Taj Mahal*... they will be hummed and cherished for eternity."

Actors, today, he feels are more into dance, stunts and martial arts. "Even I had to take horse-riding and sword-fencing lessons

at Filmistan," he rewinds. "But an equal stress was paid to emoting and dramatic skills. In my wildest imagination, I cannot imagine myself gyrating my hips like most of our heroes do today... and that too without blushing."

Alluding to *Mrityudaata*, he continues, "Once the script and story were more important than superstars.. and they should always be. Look what happened to that comeback film... since everything was meant to just highlight him, the result was a mess."

Since he seems to be in the mood for frankspeak, I ask him about the talk that he shared an intimate relationship with some of his heroines. Without blanching, he says coolly, "I'd be a hypocrite if I were to deny my intimacy with some of my heroines. It is normal for any man to come close to a woman whom he works with 12 hours a day... or even spends evenings with at outdoor locations after pack-up. It's human to get physically attracted. *Ghee ke paas aag rakho to* combustion to *hoga hi*. But I wouldn't like to name the heroines I was intimate with... because they are no longer in this world. They have passed away. So why sully their names?"

I'D BE A HYPOCRITE IF I WERE TO DENY MY INTIMACY WITH SOME OF MY HEROINES

Film lore has it that Pradeep Kumar was close to his frequent co-stars Madhubala and Meena Kumari. I tell him that and he doesn't deny or confirm it, preferring to be the quintessential gentleman who won't rake up the past.

It's said that he nearly went bankrupt because the films he produced came a-cropper at the box office. "Yes," he smiles wanly. "I produced *Ek Jhalak* and *Police*. Both incurred heavy losses. Not because the films were bad. But because of a man called Padam Maheshwari who was an officer at the Film Censor Board. For no apparent reason, he hated me. Scenes from both my films were mutilated. And when I'd point out that similar scenes had been passed in other films, he would become even more vindictive. My films were delayed and released in tatters. My distributors lost quite a lot of money and my standing plummeted in the market."

To wind up, I ask him about his daughter Beena. Just a few years ago, she was seen in every second film as a mother, sister, *saas* or what-have-you. But for quite a while, she seems to have vanished. Sighing audibly, her father says, "Beena was a very beautiful girl in her prime. And though she entered films late, she seemed to be quite talented. Unfortunately, the man she chose as her life partner was wrong for her.

"She had to suffer a lot. Although he was a capable director (Ajoy Biswas) and had given hits like *Sambandh* and *Samjhauta*, he was addicted to the bottle. Alcohol ruined him and his marriage to Beena. Believe me, it hurts to talk about this. In an hour, I have told you the outline of my life and career. To tell you more details, it would take an entire year."

I shuffle out of the apartment. It wouldn't be fair to ask him to dredge out more hurt, more emotional injury. As I leave, he smiles... by now the evening has cast lengthening shadows.

Sabir Masani